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INTELLIGENCE PANEL OKs GATES AS DEPUTY CIA CHIEF IN RARE PUBLIC HEARING
BY TIM AHERN
WASHINGTON

The Senate Intelligence Committee on Thursday approved the nomination of Robert M. Gates as the new deputy director of the Central Intelligence Agency, but first it got Gates to promise to try to reduce leaks to the press and to admit the CIA botched its handling of a Soviet defector last year.

Gates was endorsed by a 10-0 vote after a rare public hearing by the Republican-controlled panel, which has been feuding with the Reagan administration over who is leaking national security secrets to the press.

Before Gates' nomination to succeed John N. McMahon was sent to the Senate floor, he also defended the increasing use of covert action by the Reagan administration.

Gates, 42, is a career intelligence officer whose most recent post was deputy director for intelligence. He was named by CIA director William Casey to the No. 2 slot after McMahon quit in February.

Several senators criticized leaks they said came from the executive branch about possible U.S. military actions against either terrorists or Libya, which the administration has claimed is a major backer of international terrorism.

"The way it's coming out is devastating to our national security," said Sen. Sam Nunn, D-Ga.

Sen. William Cohen, R-Maine, said some of the leaks appear to be politically motivated, and he disputed Gates' contention that the information is being leaked by low-level staffers.

Some of the information is coming "from the highest officials in the executive branch," said Cohen.

Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., vice chairman of the panel, told Gates that "many times, the information that has appeared in the press about intelligence has not only been earlier, but more complete, than official notice to the committee."

"It is clear that all or nearly all such leaks of sensitive information have originated at various levels in the executive branch," said Leahy.

In response to the complaints, Gates said he thought most leaks were due to a "lack of discipline" by people with access to sensitive information.

He told the panel that "I'm pretty certain that some of the more significant leaks of the last few days have been reported to the FBI" for investigation.

"If they haven't, they will," he said, without detailing the specific cases he had in mind.

Gates also agreed with Cohen and Sen. Frank Murkowski, R-Alaska, that the CIA had mishandled the case of Vitaly Yurchenko, a former high-ranking KGB agent who had defected to the United States last year.

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Yurchenko apparently became unhappy, walked out of a Georgetown restaurant last Nov. 2, and then showed up two days later at the Soviet embassy here, claiming he had been drugged by the United States. He returned to the Soviet Union.

The CIA has changed its method of handling defectors so that a single case officer will now deal with a defector from the start to build rapport with the defector and try to sense trouble before it develops, Gates said.

He said that defectors have not been restrained in the past and they should not be restrained in the future, but he added that "we ought to step back a bit" from that policy and change it enough so "they can't just walk out the door and into the Soviet embassy."

Gates also said he considered covert action "an appropriate instrument of foreign policy, as long as it is taken within a broader context."

He did not discuss specific cases, such as the CIA-backed rebels trying to overthrow Nicaragua's leftist government, or the guerrillas fighting the Soviet-supported government in Afghanistan and the Marxist government of Angola.

The Reagan administration has supported both of the latter groups and has reportedly recently decided to provide both groups with Stinger anti-aircraft missiles.

Gates admitted "it has always been difficult to keep American involvement in a large-scale, para-military action secret."

But even when the program becomes widely known, official involvement can still be denied and that provides "a fig leaf" for the United States in international circles, he said.